

The Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation - Staff Report January 11, 2010

Plan: To Create a Baltimore City Historic District in the Ashburton Neighborhood.

Request: Consider Local Historic District Designation

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Description Summary:

Ashburton is predominately a single-family residential neighborhood with several rows of duplexes and rowhouses, an early garden apartment complex, four churches and a small commercial strip located near the edge of the neighborhood. The neighborhood comprises 970 properties with a density of approximately 7 to 10 houses per acre. In the center of the neighborhood, *Ashburton*, the 19th-century country estate of the Gittings family, sits on an acre of land, lending its name and giving 120 acres of its original estate to build the neighborhood. Ashburton (the neighborhood) captures the architectural styles and suburban house types of the 1920s through the 1950s. English Tudor, Colonial Revival, Italian Renaissance Revival, Spanish Mission Revival, French Revival and other stylistic details decorate these houses. The house types range from bungalows, four squares, cottages, ranchers, and cape cods to duplexes and rowhouses. Character defining elements of the neighborhood range from Tudor-style trim details, stained-glass, highly ornamental doors, several roof shapes, front porches and a variety of sheathing materials such as clapboard siding, brick, stucco, and cedar shake shingles. Regular set-backs, building heights, and rear parking with detached and attached garages create a uniform rhythm to the neighborhood. Ashburton represents a well cared for early 20th-century suburban neighborhood.

Significance:

Ashburton, like most suburban neighborhoods of Baltimore, was first a lavish summer estate. Early in the 1840s John Sterret Gittings, a prominent banker, constructed a large country estate along the Liberty Road, approximately four miles from the central city. The Ashburton estate comprised approximately 300 acres, spanning both sides of Liberty Heights Avenue and from the Western MD railroad tracks to the three-mile house. During the Civil War, Ashburton served as an observation post for the Union Army. The original structure was enlarged in circa 1869. In 1891 and in 1894 fire ripped through the outbuildings of the estate. In 1910 the house was enlarged again to "include eight additional rooms (*Sun* 3-11-1910)." By the 1950s, the house was renovated into senior housing. Recently private owners bought the property and are now meticulously restoring it. The mansion meets landmark criteria for designation.



Figure 1 Ashburton as photographed in the 1910s. This images captures the 1869 and 1910 additions.
(William H. Fisher, *Some Old Houses of Maryland*. Oxford Maryland: privately published by Virginia Stewart Fisher, 1979).



Figure 2 Ashburton as photographed in the 1910s. This images captures the 1869 and 1910 additions.
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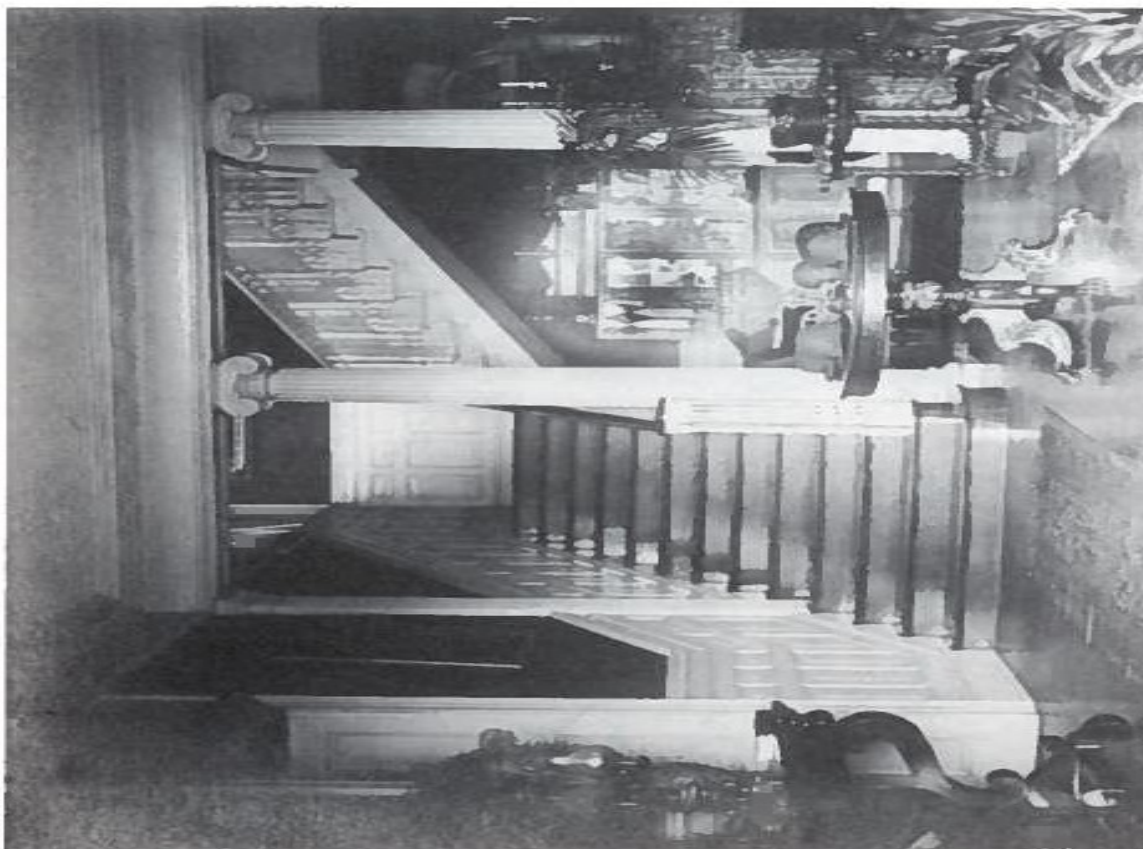


Figure 3 Ashburton as photographed in the 1910s. This images captures the 1869 and 1910 additions. (William H. Fisher, *Some Old Houses of Maryland*. Oxford Maryland: privately published by Virginia Stewart Fisher, 1979).

With the conversion of horsecar lines to electric streetcars in the 1890s, the greater area of northwest Baltimore began a period of intense change. Highland Park, a 1870s partially developed suburb directly south of Ashburton, was renamed Walbrook in the early 1890s. Walbrook quickly added streets, houses, and a commercial strip along North Avenue to the 1870 plan of Highland Park. In the 1890s and early 1900s many large summer estates were sold and subdivided into house lots. In 1892, 32 acres of the Gittings estate were sold to Frank Callaway who built a house for himself, subdivided the rest of the property, and named his new community Forest Park. By 1908 the old Vickers estate and the site of the Highland Park hotel, was sold and Mount Alto and Buelah Villa (now Garwyn Oaks) were laid out. Windsor Hills, Arlington, West Arlington, were also in existence by the 1900s. These new developments were built as suburban neighborhoods, following strict written and unwritten rules of architectural styles, building types, land-use, and landscaping design.

In 1908, the City bought a large tract of the Gittings estate to construct the Ashburton Reservoir and Park (which later was renamed Hanlon Park in 1918) In 1916 John Gittings 3rd, acting as trustee for the Gittings estate, deeded George R. Morris a tract of land for \$63, 669 (land records SCL3031-551). The boundaries were roughly Callaway Avenue (centerline) on the west, Liberty Heights on the south and somewhere near Dolfield and Sequoia Avenues on the north, and the Western Maryland railroad tracks on the east. Most likely because of legal problems, Morris did

not place building lots onto the market until 1920. A Baltimore sun article March 11, 1920, summarized the sale and the subdivision plan:

One hundred and twenty acres of the Gittings estate, on the Reisterstown road, in the old annex, has been sold and will be developed as a residence section, said John S. Gittings yesterday, although he declined to give the name of the purchaser...

The property will be developed, it is reported, on the lines of Guilford and Roland Park, except that there will be reservations to restrict certain kinds of improvements to certain sections in accordance with the lay of the land and the particular class of development on its border...(Sun 3/11/1920)

Ashburton, like most suburban development of the time, included covenants into their real estate deeds. The following were the general covenants found in the 1916 deed between Gittings and Morris:

- A Single house was to be erected on each plot
- The porch lines were to lie at least 40 feet from the sidewalks.
- No brick rowhouses were to be erected.
- Residential dwellings were to be the only structures erected.
- The houses front on Callaway Place must not cost less than \$5,000 and others [within the neighborhood] not cost less than \$4000.
- Any changes on Callaway were to be submitted to John Gittings.
- The development was to be named Ashburton.

A more elaborate system of covenants, however, was incorporated into the deeds of the building lots that Morris sold to homeowners. The October, 1920 plat, as seen directly below, shows the subdivision separated into lettered sections. Sections marked "A" were subject to the same restriction as stated above. Sections "B" and "D" on said plat were to be improved by single dwellings unconnected, or by groups of not more than six homes. No home was to cost less than \$4,000 and single homes were to be built on lots of not less than 55 feet fronts. Section "C" houses were to be single dwellings built in lots not less than 50 feet front or groups not more than 6 houses to a group. The minimum cost of each house was to be \$5,000 and the houses facing the Reservation (the twenty acres set aside for the original house), if built in groups, were to be of the same general type of exterior architecture as those built by the George R. Morris Organization and known as the University Homes on Canterbury and Cloverhill Roads north of 39th Street.

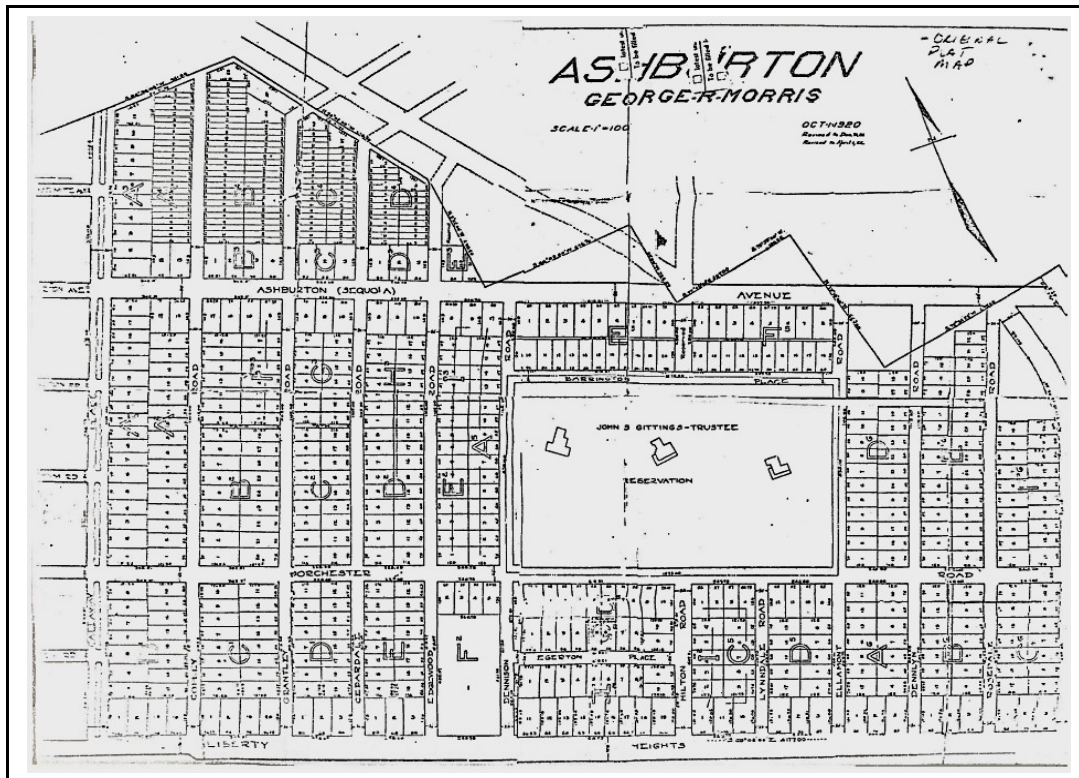


Figure 4 Original subdivision plat 1920.

In addition to the covenants placed on building lots by George R. Morris, the Northwest Realty Company, a subsidiary of the George R. Morris Organization, added a far-reaching and subtle clause:

Until 1931, no owner shall have the right to sell or rent the same without the written consent of the Grantor herein which shall have the right to pass upon the character, desirability and other qualifications of the proposed purchaser or occupant of the property.

This clause was used to support religious, ethnic and racial discrimination. As early as 1923, this scenario played out. On August 8, 1923, the Baltimore Sun reported the following:

200 residents and property owners in Ashburton have protested the sale to Sol Rose, 1646 West North Avenue, of the property at 3600 Copley Road, according to a bill to enjoin the sale that was filed yesterday in Circuit Court, No. 2...

The protests were made, according to the bill, because Rose conducts a pawn brokerage business at 636 West Baltimore Street, a form of business activity which the bill declares is repugnant to other residents. The bill also states that Rose is a Hebrew and all the other residents are Christians. The original deed, according to the bill, provided that no sale should be made without the written consent of the complainant.

On November 8, 1923, the Sun reported the court decision:

A decree was signed yesterday by Judge Duke Bond, in Circuit Court No. 2, allowing Sol Rose five days within which to vacate the property at 3600 Copley Road, Ashburton. The time allowed was unnecessary, it was said, as Rose moved last Monday.

Ashburton for its first ten years was a completely White, Christian subdivision, but as the neighborhood matured its demographics changed.

Throughout the 1920s, development of Ashburton moved forward at a profitable pace. In 1920, Morris published a brochure advertising his new development. This brochure detailed the advantages of living in Ashburton, reinforcing the concept of an ideal, planned community:

Experts are in charge of the various departments which co-operate to cover every phase of real estate activity. Its engineers attend to the grading and planning of properties and landscape designing. The architectural department is equipped to design your home, the construction department will build it, and the financial department will gladly arrange suitable terms for financing. The purchase, sale, and rental of properties is in the hands of an efficient brokerage department.

In 1922, the City, under the direction of R. Keith Compton, Chairman of the Paving Commission, entered into an agreement with the Northwestern Real Estate Company, to jointly pay for the construction of eight streets in Ashburton (Baltimore Sun, 1-11-1922). In January 1922, Morris applied for a building permit to construct six cottages and bungalows at 3511 and 3603 Copley, 3601 and 3604 Grantley, 3503 Edgewood, and 3505 Cedardale Roads. By January of 1924 Ashburton was growing fast, "Since 1921, 275 lots have been purchased and 160 homes have been erected (Baltimore Sun, 1-20-1924)." In 1926 the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church South hired Alfred Leach to design and construct a church and school building on the northwest corner of Liberty Heights and Wabash Avenues. By the 1930s approximately two thirds of Ashburton was developed. By the 1950s all but less than ten lots were developed.

During this time, the neighborhood demographics were changing like many Baltimore neighborhoods. At the end of 1931 the covenant that allowed the Northwest Realty Company to discriminate against Jews and African Americans expired. By post World War II influential Jews lived in the neighborhood. In 1956 an African American high school principal moved into the neighborhood, becoming the first African American to live in Ashburton; most of the neighborhood remained entirely White (Antero Pietila, *Not In My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped A Great American City*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 150).

This changed as the Manning Shaw Real Estate Company, known for its block busting tactics, worked to integrate Ashburton. In June of 1958, A Manning Shaw subsidiary realty company, Eutaw Realty, bought 3800 Grantley Road and "installed" an African American family (Pietila, 151). The Carter family had eight children and very little means, not even enough to pay for food and heat. Sergeant Violet Hill Whyte, the first African American police woman in Baltimore, found Mrs. Carter and her eight children huddled around a stove to keep warm. No food was in the kitchen and many of the kids had no shoes. Mr. Carter did not make enough money to pay for rent and take care of the children. In addition, Mr. Carter did not understand the terms of the sale and neither did Manning. Both men did not know how long the repayment period would be, and both thought the sale was in "fee," but the record showed that it was a land installment plan (Pietila, 151-152). Two neighbors with the support of the neighborhood association then filed a formal complaint with the Real Estate Commission, accusing Eutaw Realty of deceiving the purchaser and misleading the neighborhood by putting up a "sold" sign on the property. The hearing eventually led to the suspension of the Manning Shaw real estate

license. The finding was upheld in Maryland Courts. The newspapers called this case the first blockbusting trial in Baltimore (Pietila, 151-154).

Subsequently, the Ashburton neighbors decided to confront the issue of blockbusting head on. Blockbusting was not just about integrating neighborhoods or forcing neighborhoods to become multi-racial, but it was a strategy by some real estate professionals to consciously affect the value of homes by manipulating the fears of residents. Realtors would set up for sale and sold signs in front yards and then begin aggressively to try and buy houses from existing residents at low prices. In turn they would sell these houses at high prices or on installment plans that would garner as much profit to the realtors as possible. The deleterious effect of blockbusting was sudden, wholesale change of the neighborhood population that wiped out social networks, depleted social capital, devalued properties (because money that may have gone into maintenance and upkeep is now going into the hands of the realtors), prevented house maintenance, instilled fear and suspicion within the neighborhood, and produced other negative attributes. The neighborhood association worked diligently to minimize “panic selling” and to welcome African Americans into the neighborhood.

The neighborhood association created “a program to combat fear and prevent economic loss in changing neighborhoods (Sun 11-10-1958).” This plan coordinated many block meetings and personal interviews with families thinking of moving in hopes of preventing families from moving (Sun 11-10-1958). These meetings and interviews were interracial. By 1959 this effort gained national attention, when the Saturday Evening Post published an article entitled *When a Negro Moves Next Door*. Written by resident Ellsworth E. Rosen, the article chronicled the Ashburton’s efforts to prevent blockbusting tactics in the neighborhood. The residents started the Ashburton Area Association, which was considered the first association open to both races. They sent two letters asking residents to join. 400 out of 1100 households joined the association. Next, the association set up block meetings. At these block meetings African American and White residents spoke together emphasizing “if you want to protect your home and your way of life, a simple solution lies open to you. You don’t have to join the Army and face death on foreign soil. You don’t even have to risk bodily injury. All you have to do is to continue living in your home (*Saturday Evening Post* 4/4/1959, page 139).”

The efforts of Ashburton also grew into citywide efforts to confront blockbusting. In 1959 James Rouse, Ellsworth Rosen and Sidney Hollander, Jr. incorporated Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc. (BNI). With help from the Greater Baltimore Committee, the BNI has been an important organization fighting discrimination in housing, and educating renters and buyers regarding fair housing laws.



**Figure 5 –Ellsworth Rosen (right) and Samuel Daniels (left)
from *Saturday Evening Post* 4/4/1959**



Figure 6 *Saturday Evening Post* 4/4/1959, page 139

By 1969 Ashburton was 90% African American and 10% white. By 1973, Ashburton became the home of many prominent African Americans, including politicians, physicians, educators, lawyers, judges, etc. Although the goals of the interracial Ashburton area Association did not materialize in an evenly interracial mixed neighborhood, the effect of this effort helped to contribute to a stable, vibrant community today. In short, Ashburton's history of interracial efforts influenced the ongoing success of the neighborhood.



Figure 7 Ashburton foursquares



Figure 8 Spanish Mission Revival Style houses



Figure 9 Dutch Colonial Style



Figure 10 Modern Style



Figure 11 Tudor Revival Style

Staff Analysis:

Ashburton meets CHAP criterion #1 for its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history. The development of Ashburton illustrates the suburban development patterns that were used to create the suburban-style, mostly detached neighborhoods in Baltimore City. Ashburton is also associated with Baltimore's early history in confronting blockbusting and embracing racial integration. These efforts contributed to the creation of fair housing laws and advocacy organizations. These efforts also influenced the current stable, vibrant conditions within the neighborhood.

The neighborhood meets CHAP criterion #3 for historic district designation as a neighborhood that embodies the distinctive characteristics of an early twentieth-century suburb on the outskirts of an urban, central city area. The neighborhood retains excellent examples of residential housing types of the era such as bungalows, cottages, foursquares, duplexes, cape cods, and ranchers, daylight rowhouses and detailing from a variety of architectural styles. The architectural styles, street patterns, foot paths, and landscaping reflect early twentieth century suburban ideals of lower densities, convenience to services and amenities, garden settings, variety in housing appearance and style, and safe roads. The housing stock is in very good condition and the district retains a high degree of historic integrity. Most intrusions are artificial siding, vinyl windows, and replacement porch columns.

Staff Recommends approval